New Traditions

Options for Rural High School Excellence

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FOREWORD

If the condition of man is to be progressively ameliorated, as we fondly hope and believe, education is to be the chief instrument in effecting it.

Thomas Jefferson,
Governor of Virginia, 1779-81,
President of the United States, 1801-09

The 81-year-old school house rises with dignity out of the black soil of the Mississippi Delta. By day it bustles with the 292 students, in grades 8 to 12, of Shaw High School. By night it serves 100 or so adults taking courses from Coahoma Community College.

From the wall of a commons room, a large poster enumerates the "Fastest Growing Jobs in State" along with their average annual salary. At number one is "computer support specialist" ($34,110), followed by "computer software engineer" ($63,490), then "home health aide" ($18,010) and so on to number 10, "dental hygienist" ($34,820).

Down the hallway, a wide expanse of hard-wood floor, weathered yet polished glossy, is the classroom of history teacher Jessie Williams, who has spent 36 years on the Shaw High faculty. She has affixed another list to the wall near the window-unit air conditioner. Her list is entitled, "Self-Defeating Behavior," and it includes such items as "Not Prepared Enough," "Hanging with the Wrong People," "Taking Things Too Personal," and "Quitting Too Fast."

Taken together, these two posters illuminate why the South needs high-performing rural high schools. The South has shifted from a farm-and-factory economy to the new-new economy that rewards thinking, team-work, entrepreneurial skills and learning over a lifetime. The South needs schools aligned with the demands of an economy driven by technology and globalization, and schools that hold high expectations of their students. Such schools give young Southerners an enhanced opportunity to thrive in the 21st Century.

Like many tiny towns struggling in the South's economic transition, Shaw, deep in Mississippi's old cotton belt, presents a challenging environment for a high school. It has a population of 2,300, a mostly boarded-up main street and a median household income of a mere $19,000.

Almost all Shaw High students (99 percent of them African-Americans) qualify for free or reduced-price meals at school. Still it is a school whose principal and teachers have taken students on trips to Memphis, Dallas and New York City to broaden their horizons. One day in mid-spring, Jessie Williams led her history students through a call-and-response exercise on current events: about the presidential campaign, about the war in Iraq, about Japan, about the Sunbelt, about why people move from one region to another. She concluded, "We have to be competitive, don't we?"

SURVEYING THE TERRAIN

While the South has indeed become more urban and suburban than ever in its history, the region retains a distinctly rural culture and character. In 13 of the 16 states, the percentage of the population that is rural exceeds the U.S. average of about 21 percent rural.

Approximately 6.5 million young people attend schools in small towns and rural counties of the 16 continental states of the Southern Governors' Association. In six of those states, rural and small-town schools account for a half or more of the total student population – and in another five states, these schools hold more than 40 percent.

Thus, if the South is to issue a "passport to opportunity" to every child, its states must address the special stresses and strains felt by its nearly 14,000 rural and small town schools. Most of these schools operate under the burdens of rural disadvantages in today's economy: a weak and declining business base, a shallow tax base, isolation from job-growth centers, aging public facilities, inability to attract teachers and a heavy concentration of households living in or near poverty.

In a report issued in July, the Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture found that "the nonmetro South, with over 40 percent of the U.S. nonmetro population, has the greatest prevalence of both poverty and persistent poverty. More than one in six persons in the region are poor, and more than one in four lives in persistent poverty counties." (ERS defines a "persistent poverty" county as having 20 percent or more of the people in poverty over a 30-year period.)

At issue isn't that the South has ignored rural education. Even before *A Nation At Risk* set in motion a sweeping national movement for school reform, governors in the South had already taken the lead in sponsoring statewide initiatives. As a result, the South has made great strides in raising student achievement and holding schools accountable.

And yet, while the South worked diligently to strengthen academics, the region experienced an upsurge in teenagers leaving high school short of a diploma. In today's economy – and increasingly, no doubt, in the future – it takes education beyond high school to qualify for most jobs that sustain a middle-class standard of living. For small towns, in particular, a rise in dropouts not only diminishes individuals' prospects in life but also erodes communities' civic well being and competitiveness.

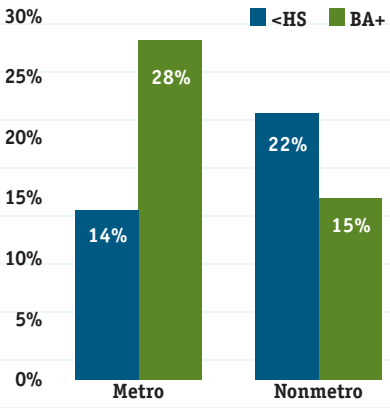
POVERTY RATE BY REGION OF U.S.

Region	Nonmetro	Metro
Northeast	10.7	10.9
Midwest	10.7	10.1
South	17.5	12.7
West	14.3	12.1

Source: Economic Research Service U.S. Department of Agriculture July 2004

Attainment: Metro/Nonmetro

Southern Adults Age 25+ by Educational Attainment and Metro/Nonmetro, 2000: Less than High School or BA+



Source: March 2000 CPS

OPPORTUNITY TO LEAD THE NATION

We know without a doubt that in our modern economy, educational achievement is probably the single greatest predictor of prosperity, a more stable family life and good citizenship. With a good education, every child has a passport to economic opportunity. The public schools of this nation made the American dream possible for me, and for millions of other people just like me.

Mark R. Warner,
Governor of Virginia

This project began with the sure knowledge that Southern states have schools that overcome rural social and economic burdens and produce substantial educational achievement. It also began with an underlying awareness that the South still has miles to go in assuring educational excellence across its rural landscape.

By issuing this report as a stimulus to policy making in the states to bolster public education, the Southern Governors' Association (SGA) signals that the region intends to lead the nation toward the twin goals of improving high school graduation and college-going rates.

The purpose of this project was to learn lessons from successful schools with high-minority and/or high-poverty populations and to share those lessons among the states. With funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, SGA staff coordinated teams of educators and education policy makers, appointed by their governors, to focus especially on the needs of rural and small town high schools.

In May, the teams visited Shaw High School in Mississippi and Swain County High School in Bryson City, N.C. To draw on lessons from outside the region, the teams also visited Poland Regional High School in Maine and the Julia Richman Education Complex in New York City, where a huge facility has been divided into four autonomous small high schools, along with an elementary and a middle school.

The SGA-coordinated teams worked in collaboration with the Rural School and Community Trust (Rural Trust) and the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB). The Rural Trust provided analysis from its staff's visits to additional schools across the region. The SREB offered insights from its long experience in studying education trends, working with individual schools and gathering a wealth of data. The teams also examined lessons from the *Promising Futures* report of the Maine Commission on Secondary Education.

As they deliberated over their findings, team participants discussed, from time to time, court cases involving questions of adequacy in education offerings and equity in financing of

rural schools, debates over whether to consolidate small school districts and the federal No Child Left Behind requirements. But it was not the purpose of this project to develop a response to a particular law, regulation or ruling. Rather, participants devoted themselves to assessing what is working, what gaps need to be closed and what policies states should consider – that is, whatever the circumstances state-to-state, to come up with options for governors to enhance rural and small town high schools.

Through all of the visits and subsequent deliberations, there was a quiet, yet firm, sense of determination: It is time for the South to meet anew the challenge of change and to lead the nation in designing high schools to meet the demands of the 21st Century.

As a product of Yazoo City, Mississippi, public schools—the embodiment of rural education—I would like to applaud this project's stated goal of engaging state education leaders in re-thinking their vision of success for rural schools. By identifying and visiting high performing rural schools, such as Shaw High School in Mississippi, education leaders from around the South were able to see firsthand how these schools overcame challenges. At the same time, they observed strategies used by these success stories that could potentially be put to use in their own state.

Haley Barbour,
Governor of Mississippi

WHERE THE SOUTH HAS ADVANCED

Through the 1990s and the early years of this decade, the South did more than the rest of the nation to raise high school graduation requirements. Southern states have made discernible progress in delivering challenging academic studies to high school students.

At least six states have eliminated the "general track" in high schools, thus requiring students to complete a solid academic core, whether focused on college or a career. States that have eliminated the "general track" have experienced over the last decade greater gains in student scores on the SAT and ACT tests for college readiness than the nation. Nine states require either end-of-course or graduation exams.

Southern states lead the nation in teachers with certification through the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Nearly 22,000 of the 32,000 board-certified teachers are in the South. Board-certified teachers, according to a recent independent analysis, produce higher student achievement than teachers without board certification.

Eight Southern states exceed the national percentage of public schools offering Advanced Placement courses. More black students in the South take AP courses than black students in the rest of the nation.

Indeed, the 1990s saw an increase in college going in the South among blacks and Latinos. And yet, blacks and Latinos fail to complete high schools at a higher rate than white Southerners.

Percent of Public Schools in the South Offering the Advanced Placement Program

	1996	1998	2000	2002	2003
United States	58%	59%	60%	65%	66%
Southern States	61	63	65	72	74
Alabama	54	44	38	36	34
Arkansas	28	32	32	36	41
Florida	82	83	82	86	87
Georgia	82	79	80	82	81
Kentucky	67	64	68	75	80
Louisiana	21	20	20	24	22
Maryland	92	94	93	94	94
Mississippi	39	37	38	34	35
Missouri	23	24	27	34	32
North Carolina	88	87	87	93	94
Oklahoma	16	23	37	56	68
South Carolina	96	92	92	94	90
Tennessee	54	52	50	61	56
Texas	54	61	66	71	71
Virginia	87	82	86	87	85
West Virginia	78	70	64	73	76

Sources: The Southern Regional Education Board, Progress in Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate in SREB States, 2003, special analysis based on The College Board, Advanced Placement Examination statistics, various years. The College Board calculates the percentages by dividing the actual numbers of participating schools by estimated numbers of public high schools, based on surveys by Quality Education Data Inc. The SREB regional rates are the means of the rates of the two median SREB states.

WARNING BELLS RING

Despite evidence of clear progress the South faces formidable challenges, especially in its rural areas. While the South has placed strong emphasis on improving achievement, it has not been equally aggressive in keeping students in school between 9th and 12th grade.

Statisticians use several methods to measure "drop-outs." In the accompanying table, SREB has summarized three measurements. What emerges from this data is the sharp ring of a warning bell. Across the South, somewhere between 20 percent and 40 percent of teenagers who go into the 9th grade do not come out of the 12th grade four years later.

Team participants took special note of a report, "Locating the Dropout Crisis," issued in June by the Center for Social Organization of Schools of Johns Hopkins University. The report

Public High School Graduation Rates by Southern State

	Mortensen*		Green**	Common Core***
	1988	2001	2001	2001
United States	73%	67 %	70 %	80%
Alabama	74	58	66	75
Arkansas	79	73	75	74
Florida	63	55	56	NA
Georgia	63	51	56	64
Kentucky	69	64	71	79
Louisiana	62	59	70	63
Maryland	76	74	74	83
Mississippi	68	57	64	71
Missouri	75	72	74	81
North Carolina	68	59	63	NA
Oklahoma	74	73	77	79
South Carolina	65	48	57	NA
Tennessee	69	55	60	72
Texas	65	62	67	NA
Virginia	75	75	74	81
West Virginia	77	73	84	83

The graduation rate data in this table comes from three separate sources, each with its own calculation method.

Mortensen: Tom Mortenson, who publishes the authoritative Postsecondary Education Opportunity newsletter, uses a method that divides the number of diploma recipients by the number of students in the 9th grade for years earlier. It does not include as recipients graduates of GED, special education or alternative programs. This method assumes that the number of students who transfer in and out of a school balances out over time.

Green: The calculations of Jay Greene of the Manhattan Institute are now widely cited as indicative of the scope of dropouts. His method estimates a 9th-grade cohort enrollment obtained by averaging the 8th, 9th, and 10th grade enrollments for the same cohort. He also adjusts for mobility, including migration and student transfers. Then he divides the number of students who completed high school by the 9th-grade cohort four years earlier.

Common Core: Data in this column are reported by states to the National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, Local Education Agency University Dropout and Completion Data File. States designated by NA did not provide data to the U.S. Department of Education. NCES determines the dropout rate for each grade level per year. The 2001 graduation rate is determined by dividing the number of graduates by the total number of dropouts plus the number of high school completers. There are variations in states' reporting. In some cases, states include GED recipients or graduates of alternative programs.

listed seven Southern states among the 15 states in which are found nearly 80 percent of the high schools that produce the highest number of dropouts.

While the Johns Hopkins study found "weak promoting power" especially in high schools with a majority of minority students in Northern states and big cities, the report also observed: "It is only in the South that large numbers of white students attend high schools in which on-time graduation is not the norm. In some states, this appears to be partly a function of rural poverty."

Dropping out has severe long-range consequences: People who do not finish high school are more likely to be unemployed, to live in poverty, to land in prison and in many respects to suffer isolation and disconnection from mainstream society.

We have a fundamental responsibility to provide our children with excellence in the classroom. The quality of our schools and our vigilant pursuit of the best education possible are inexorably linked to our economic growth, quality of life and the future of our nation.

Brad Henry,
Governor of Oklahoma

Along with the rise in drop-outs has come an increase in young people turning to the GED (general education development) equivalency test. In 2001, the South accounted for more than four out of 10 GED recipients in the United States. For many young adults, the GED represents a second chance. And yet, it is a disturbing trend that too many teenagers are turning to the GED diploma instead of a high school diploma.

Many young adults who did not finish high school need the GED to give them a step up early in their working lives. But GED recipients, in aggregate, do not do as well in the modern economy as diploma recipients – a critical fact for states and communities where too many teenagers substitute a GED for high-school completion. Fewer than three out of 10 GED recipients go off to college, while six out of 10 diploma recipients do. GED recipients and drop-outs without the GED have the same unemployment rates.

After a climb of many decades, the South has nearly matched the nation in adults with a high school education – 77 percent in the South, 80 percent in the U.S. But significant gaps remain along racial and ethnic lines. Nearly five out of 10 Latino adults now living in the South have less than a high school education; among black Southern adults, three out of 10 lack a high school diploma. Black men in the South trail far behind black women in enrollment in universities and colleges.

FINDINGS: LEARNING FROM SCHOOLS

In mid-summer, the SGA sponsored a forum in Atlanta where team participants, advisers to governors, and staff members of the SREB and Rural Trust gathered to consider their findings from the school visits and the ramifications for their states, communities and schools. Here are the findings around which a general consensus emerged:

LEADERSHIP, LEADERSHIP, LEADERSHIP – A high school principal has multiple roles to play: as a leader in curriculum and instruction, as a supervisor and supporter of teachers, as a mentor and motivator of students. Skillful leadership from the principal is essential to creating and sustaining a high-performing rural high school.

And yet, too many rural principals have little training in instructional leadership. Many devote a lot of time to a host of duties (administrative, extracurricular events and such) and not enough time to conducting classroom observations and working with teachers to bolster their instructional strategies.

POWER OF DATA – In the high school, change is difficult. It is an institution long resistant to change. Data provides a tool for breaking down old barriers and breaking apart old mind-sets – and building a consensus around and plan for higher performance.

It is especially important for rural high schools to gather and deploy data about their own students, about trends within their own institution. How many young people have dropped out? Are students taking higher-level courses? What happens to a school's graduates – and to its drop-outs? What are a school's strengths and weaknesses in academic achievement?

Schools need, as a team participant said, "a culture of discussing results." Data-driven decision making can cut down, or cut off, the incidences of students dropping out before 12th grade, as well as propel a school to high performance.

HUMANIZE THE SCHOOL – Using data doesn't mean treating students like numbers. Indeed, rural schools, most of them being relatively small, have certain advantages. To teachers and principals, students and parents come with real faces, seen in school and in the community, too.

Smallness has its disadvantages, to be sure. Often rural schools are not large enough to offer certain science-lab or AP classes. In some places, small, rural schools are governed and administered by a web of family and friends that makes enforcing accountability difficult.

Our growth places demands on our education system that we didn't have before. Our student population is more diverse. We have more foreign-born students. Some communities have absorbed rapid population growth. Others have seen decline. We all recognize the changes, and we all feel the consequences.

Sonny Perdue,
Governor of Georgia

Still, states can respect the benefits of the lower student-teacher ratios of smaller schools. And, states can help rural schools overcome academic disadvantages: through appropriate distance-learning; through cooperative arrangements to share teachers in specialized subjects among neighboring schools and to deliver professional development services; and through collaboration between high schools and community colleges.

STOP SORTING, START TEACHING – Because teachers and administrators have a community-based familiarity with their students, rural schools can fall easily into "tracking," whether intentionally or unintentionally. "Students who spend their entire secondary years in lower track homogenous groups experienced depressed aspirations, lower academic self-confidence and limited achievement," said the *Promising Futures* report of the Maine Commission on Secondary Education.

As a matter of necessity for the future of the South's economy and its community-building, it is critical that teachers in rural school hold high expectations for all of their students. To do that, therefore, means to eliminate lower level classes and to enroll all students in a strong core curriculum that paves the way to post-secondary academic or career-building technical education. Students need mentors, and every student in a rural high school should have an adult mentor.

POWER OF A FRAMEWORK – Each of the four schools visited by the SGA project teams benefited from a school-improvement framework. Swain County High School uses the SREB High Schools That Work model. Shaw High School uses the First Things First model of the Institute for Research and Reform in Education. Both Poland High in Maine and the Julia Richman Complex in New York City implemented the Campus School Plan of the Coalition of Essential Schools.

There are many useful models. It isn't crucial that rural schools agree on a single model. Actually, some high-performing high schools do not employ a single model, but rather draw from several to adapt to their distinct circumstances. What would stimulate higher performance is for rural high schools to select a framework, or elements of several frameworks, in light of their own needs and challenges.

A framework connects rural schools to a larger network of technical assistance and educational research. A framework provides an experienced partner carrying a road map and trained in coaching to guide principal-leaders and teachers through a school-improvement process. A framework does not substitute for the knowledge of and devotion to a community

held by a school's staff and faculty, but a framework, along with external coaching, can help instill a compelling vision of higher achievement in a rural school.

FLEXIBILITY IN FINANCING – In both Swain County and Shaw, a collaborative partnership marked the relationship between the district superintendent and the high school principal. Team participants noticed, in particular, that the high schools benefit from the ability of a superintendent to act with some flexibility to match money with educational priorities.

Given the shallow tax bases of rural communities, their high schools are unlikely to be funded at the same level as their affluent suburban counterparts in the near term. Tight state-imposed categorical funding can lead in small schools to inadequate pockets of money that work against a cohesive strategy for improving achievement. States can assist rural schools by giving superintendents and principals discretion – and holding them accountable – to shift and carry over funding to make available money go as far as possible. States could also assist rural schools in proposal-writing and prospecting for philanthropic and federal grants.

POWER OF A STATE VISION – Much of the benefit from the project has already been realized through state-to-state sharing of policy initiatives. Perhaps more than any other U.S. region, the South is accustomed to regional cooperation and competition – to comparing and contrasting one state's performance with another, to states learning from the successes of their neighbors. Georgia's Hope Scholarship and North Carolina's SmartStart early childhood program both gave rise to similar initiatives in other states.

Responding to change is not a new experience for the South. With governors as the single most compelling voice for educational change, states can adopt a clear vision for high-school improvement. Most states do not have such a written visionary statement, outlining core principles that high schools should follow. With such a statement, states can give principals and superintendents a combination of guidance and leverage for dramatic changes in school and classroom practices.

Julia Richman Complex/Urban Academy, New York City

The Julia Richman Education Complex is many things, but Southern and rural it is not. The complex occupies nearly an entire city block in the Upper East Side of Manhattan. For 14 years, through the 1980s and into the early 1990s, New York State classified Richman as a failing secondary school. It seemed to epitomize the dysfunctional, graffiti-marked urban high school.

A genuinely big idea transformed Julia Richman High. In 1993, Richman began its conversion from a large urban high school into four autonomous small high schools contained within a single building. In addition, the building also contains a K-8 school and a middle school for autistic students.

While it is nearly impossible to imagine an institution like the Richman Education Complex in a small Southern town, the demographics are strikingly familiar and SGA team members visited the place to learn from the fruits of the big idea. In particular, team participants looked at the Urban Academy, one of the four high schools, and visited with its coordinator Ann Cook.

Urban Academy practices unorthodox methods: It does not have a standard course of study. Most of its classes have students at different grade levels. The school attracts students who have failed at traditional schools and seeks to engage them through courses with low student-to-teacher ratios that feature projects, experiments, exhibits and presentations. Cook explained that her school opts out of the state's testing program; her view is that assessment is a "major obstacle" to engaging students through creative teaching.

One of the challenges facing Urban Academy has to do with how to provide evidence in the spirit of accountability when not participating in state assessments. Still, the SGA-coordinated state teams identified an array of practices to consider from their visit to the Julia Richman Complex:

- Creative use of space, not allowing structure to impede the development of small, student-friendly schools.
- Small autonomous schools can share common areas, such as a cafeteria, and common activities, such as a basketball team.
- High expectations sustained, in a setting of no set curriculum for students to advance from one grade to another. School's policy and concept supports and encourages student participation and learning, and allows teachers to design classes based upon their own expertise and interest.
- Hire competent teachers who possess the abilities to guide student learning through the use of real-life situations and projects – and to create an atmosphere within the building that celebrates individuality within a warm, unconventional, and safe environment.
- Provide teachers with access to multiple copies of actual literature to support learning activities in the classroom.
- Strong leadership from the administration, combined with teacher involvement in decision making.
- Each school within Richman has its autonomy and its unique mission, while the complex is governed by a council of representatives from each school.
- Each school understands importance of common planning and sharing of resources.
- Giving students the freedom to learn in new and innovative ways; getting them involved in their own education.
- Small learning communities, resulting in extra help for students and regular contact with caring adults.
- Leadership at the school and building level is the main reason for this school's success.
- A climate suited to the type of students who attend and a culture of using the city as a classroom.
- Unorthodox, creative schools require flexibility and support from a school district. State and local policies must support different models of achieving reform.

Poland Regional High School in Maine

This five-year-old school serves three towns, Poland, Minot and Mechanic Falls. SGA state teams visited Poland High because it was established and is governed according to the precepts enunciated in the 1998 *Promising Futures* Report by the Maine Commission on Secondary Education. Poland, thus, stands as an illustration of the results of a state acting as a catalyst in school reform.

As a relatively young school, Poland faces the challenge of showing that it can raise student achievement. Still, it has adopted practices that seek to treat students as individuals with strengths, weaknesses and distinct learning needs.

In addition to attending academic courses, every Poland student enrolls in what is known as a "roundtable" and receives one hour of credit for each roundtable year. Roundtables meet every day for half an hour. Each roundtable consists of a small group of students and a faculty adviser – and they remain together as a roundtable for four years. Each year, roundtable has a special focus. For example, junior-year roundtable features preparation for life after high school – research on post-graduation options and participation in community service.

Poland also has adopted a democratic governance structure, with involvement by faculty and students. Here are additional practices at Poland Regional High that SGA team members found notable:

- Block scheduling of classes allows more time for instruction.
- Students all have a personal learning plan.
- Small learning communities, extra help for students, co-curricular requirements, portfolio and senior celebration requirements. Students develop interpersonal capabilities when developing their sophomore core portfolio, junior career portfolio, and senior celebration.
- A student judiciary board addresses behavior issues.
- Teaching humanities each year, combining English and history.
- Student projects at each level of high school, student-led conferences with parents and teacher.
- Fifteen staff development days each school year, as well as daily planning time for teachers.
- District and state policies allowed system to create a distinctive school and not follow all of the rules – and supported school leaders when community members questioned the use of the models and practices.
- Emphasis on personalized professional development.
- Flexibility in hiring and budgeting.
- Funding for reduced class sizes.
- State established annual leadership academies at which principals and teachers develop new leadership approaches.
- State issued a policy document that assisted schools to make changes and to serve as a guide for schools and districts to use as they reform high schools.
- High expectations, instilled by strong leadership and teachers who care.

Shaw High School in Shaw, Mississippi

"Student achievement is a priority," says Charles Barron, superintendent of the Shaw School District, one of five districts in Bolivar County, Mississippi. Raising student achievement, he adds, requires a strong leader-principal, committed teachers and the willingness to identify priorities and to "put your money on them."

As principal, Barron has hired Mario Kirksey, a former college football linebacker and former college coach. In a school in which most of the students come from households of modest means, Kirksey says of his role: "I get after them pretty good. I've got to have some structure and organization." Shaw students wear a "uniform" to school: tan pants and color-of-the-day shirts.

While the school itself is small, it is divided into even smaller "learning communities." Students in grades 8-10 form the lower division. Eleventh and 12th graders comprise the upper division. Lower division students spend 100 minutes a day in math and literacy instruction.

As a small school in a poor Delta community, Shaw High can afford few frills. Even as it has sought to enhance curriculum, it has not offered Advanced Placement courses. Like many rural schools, it faces multiple challenges, including keeping strong teachers and offering courses that will serve to narrow the achievement gap between white and black students.

In their visit to Shaw, SGA team members found several notable practices from which other Southern rural schools could learn:

- A process called "tuning" in which teachers assist other teachers. All teachers are observed by fellow teachers, who then meet and provide ideas for improvement. Observed teachers commit to implement one of the strategies and meet again with fellow teachers after implementing the strategy.
- Students involved in cooperative group activities, and students provided positive written messages throughout the school to encourage them to rise to their full potential.
- Leader sets tone for cleanliness, teaching, learning, and communicating with parents.
- Neat, clean facility grounds, in spite of aged building.
- Emphasis on mathematics and English.
- Committed to bringing teachers into the process of improving instruction.
- District policy allows the community to utilize Shaw High School for community events during and after school hours.
- Superintendent intimately involved in the support and success of school and students leadership.
- Strong connection to parents and the community via the Family Resource Center, which shows commitment to developing the whole child and the role of school in the community.
- Support for teacher professional development, and for seeking outside funding to support identified needs.
- State has a system for encouraging students to attend college or institutions of higher learning.
- Teacher housing allowances among incentives for working in poor districts.
- State's critical teaching shortage initiative, which designates districts like Shaw as critical shortage areas, forgives the student loans to new teachers who teach there for three years and pays for them to earn a master's degree at nearby Delta State University while teaching at Shaw.
- Strong leadership among entire faculty, school, personnel and community; high expectations.

Swain County High School in Bryson City, North Carolina

Swain High illuminates a central fact of school reform: It is a continuous process that requires persistent pursuit of excellence guided by a core set of values. When the Southern Governors' Association teams visited Swain in May 2004, Principal Janet Clapsaddle, teachers and counselors talked proudly of the school's journey dating back to the mid-1980s.

Administrators and faculty began the journey with an honest, data-driven evaluation of their own school. They found a high drop-out rate, a low college-entrance rate, academic courses taught in isolation, vocational classes not demanding and the "middle 50 percent of students" feeling neglected and not even considering postsecondary education.

Over more than a decade, Swain has been guided by what it calls its "key practices." These touchstones include higher expectations of students, more rigorous career-technical studies, upgrading academic studies, integration of studies, students actively engaged, and guidance and advisement that involves not just the counselor but all the faculty.

The following list itemizes several of the best practices, as well as state and district policies, that the SGA teams identified as a result of their visit to Swain County High School:

- Data-driven decision making as a central feature of school operations.
- State and district policies on assessment allow school administrators to benchmark their progress against other schools and to implement a system that provides schools with test data in a timely manner.
- School benefits from state supplemental funding of "low-wealth" schools and from federal funding to offset lack of local tax base as a result of national park in county.
- State policy also provides for suspending of drivers' licenses for failure to pass course work.
- A positive, non-aggressive school climate focused on academic achievement.
- Recruiting of high-quality teachers through a system of interviewing potential teachers in March, with contracts offered in April.
- Paying for six hours of credit per year for teachers to obtain advanced degrees.
- Teacher leaders meet during the summer for two days to examine results from state tests and other assignments, to identify trends and patterns in need of improvement, and to identify low performing students in need of special services. Team leaders meet with teachers and develop strategies for academic departments and teachers.
- The school emphasizes a collaboration "team" approach to teaching across disciplines, often combining academic and applied learning in a 90-minute class presided over by two teachers. Some two-teacher classes combined geometry with drafting, technology with math.
- Literacy instruction flows across the curriculum. Ninth grade students get a double-dose of English and grammar. English, science and business teachers work together to teach students how to do research papers.
- The school district provides flexibility to school administrators so they can experiment and find better ways to do their work.
- School leaders have developed a strong relationship with the local community college and nearby university that results in more than half of Swain's seniors completing courses for which they earn postsecondary credit.
- All students are expected to complete either a college preparatory or career/technical program of study that prepares them for postsecondary study.
- The school has increased its graduation requirements from 20 Carnegie units in 1990 to 28 in 2004, with students even earning a possible 32 units.
- The school has developed an outstanding guidance and advisement system that involves each student and his/her parent in working with a school representative to develop a plan of high school study leading to further learning. Each teacher also works as a mentor to approximately 15 students throughout all four years of high school.

OPTIONS:
A GUIDE TO GOVERNORS

Through their power of budgeting and persuasion, governors have a signal leadership role in determining their states' educational strategy and momentum. Out of the deliberations of the teams appointed by governors, a consensus formed around a short, yet powerfully focused, list of recommendations:

1) Make reducing the drop-out rate an urgent priority for rural schools.

Accomplishing this goal requires recognizing that students differ in their styles and pace of learning. While many make their way nimbly through basic academic studies, others need to learn through practical application. Thus, high schools need to give students more options, without lowering standards, on their journey toward a diploma. States should focus on increasing their rates of diploma-attainment and stifling the drift of teenagers toward the GED.

Transitions become critical moments for curtailing drop-outs – the transition from 8th to 9th grade and the 12th grade transition out of high school. States can adopt a policy of having schools collect data on who does and does not make it through the transitions, on who drops out and why, as a prod to taking mitigating actions. High schools can be held accountable for their graduation rates as well as test scores.

2) Invest in leadership preparation.

States need to expand in both scope and quality their resources for mid-career training and enrichment of principals. Leadership includes management skills, but also much more: improving curriculum, tapping the vital sense of mission in teachers, building relationships with parents and the community, and both instilling discipline and excitement in achievement in students.

While high performance depends on a skillful principal, high school leadership does not begin and end at the principal's office. Schools operate best when the principal forges a leadership team, including teachers, coaches and counselors. Leadership preparation should include training in such team-building, as well as expanding opportunities for teachers who aspire to become principals.

In pursuit of assuring rural high schools the leadership they need, governors can forge partnerships between public universities and rural high schools.

3) Upgrade professionalism in the corps of teachers.

Rural schools are hard to staff – in part because rural teachers are paid less than their urban and suburban peers and in part because of a combination of isolation and working conditions. It is an inescapable fact of public education today that the South's most vulnerable students are regularly taught by its less-experienced, most vulnerable teachers.

Clearly, the South needs stronger incentives – salary bonuses, housing assistance, university loan forgiveness – for recruiting teachers into hard-to-staff schools. But the region needs more. New teachers should have the mentoring of a veteran teacher. Professional development programs can be tailored specifically to the challenges of teaching in small schools.

Governors should focus on policies aimed at raising the academic-content knowledge of teachers and at training teachers in student learning through engagement with the economic and societal life of their communities. While recruitment is important, governors can engage community colleges in state efforts to solve teacher shortages through preparing for the classroom adults who already live in and want to stay in rural communities.

4) Broaden the vision of assessment.

The South should include alternative methods for its students to demonstrate their performance in high schools. The real aim of assessment is to help students succeed and to meet the required standards, but the way comprehensive tests are carried out often doesn't help schools address the problems of students at risk of failing and dropping out.

The time between tests taken and results delivered needs to be shortened, so that principals and teachers can use the results to improve student performance. And test results need to be reported so that students – and their teachers and parents – can know which standards they met and which standards they failed. In Virginia, such test reporting has positioned schools to work with students in summer school on their academic weak spots and to permit students to retake those portions of tests that they have previously failed.

In addition, states should consider allowing placement exams for post-secondary education to substitute for a graduation test – and begin envisioning exams, akin to the tests given by the armed services, that show students' readiness for education

or work after high school. States should also help rural schools in obtaining the technology necessary as standardized testing shifts from pencil-and-paper to computer screens.

5) Establish a state-level catalyst for change.

Some states have appointed education-reform commissions. Governors should examine whether their states could benefit from a commission specifically focusing on high schools.

States could also create a center for high school excellence. Such a center would serve rural schools by working to assure that they acquire appropriate technology and use it well to enhance both administration and classroom learning. A center of excellence would also help match rural schools with a framework for academic improvement, by linking principals and teachers with professional development opportunities and by providing technical assistance and advisory support.

EPILOGUE

Swain County High School teaches about 500 students in a modern facility against the backdrop of shrouded majestic mountains. Indeed, much of Swain County consists of the Great Smoky Mountain National Park. One out of four children in Swain County lives below the poverty line. Of the high school's students, 75 percent are white, 23 percent of the children are of the Eastern Cherokee tribe.

The school has adopted as a motto: "We always give our best – and then some." It has set out to lower the drop-out rate and increase the college-going rate of its graduates. Since 1990, the school has raised its graduation requirements from 20 to 28 credits. It has built a relationship with nearby Southwestern Community College to enable students to take courses off-campus or through electronic distance learning. It takes an aggressive approach to internships and job-shadowing for students.

Especially distinctive is the Swain County High approach to blending academic and career/technical education. The school has 90-minute classes in which two teachers work together in a classroom – with a geometry teacher paired with a drafting teacher, a technology teacher paired with a math teacher. The teacher who runs the computer center proudly shows off a lab of about two dozen PC work stations, built mostly with parts he scavenged and assembled by students under his guidance.

Last year, the school published Speechless, a hard-cover anthology of students' short stories and poems. In a poem titled, "291 Refuge," Kathleen Speier observes that "communication is marvelous."

Attentive ears listen to what he, she, and I have to say
I listen to you
My refuge is reliable
Learning is not stupid
Expression is alive and welcome.

By their commitment to excellence in rural high schools, the governors of the American South will ensure that all students have high-quality teachers with attentive ears, that rural schools develop a deep-down culture that rejects the notion that learning is stupid, and that expression remains alive and welcome from the high Appalachian peaks to the dark, flat land along the Mississippi River.

In West Virginia and throughout the South, education is our only passport from poverty to prosperity. I am proud that my SGA Chairman's Initiative on access to postsecondary education has led to an extended discussion and analysis of the needs of small and rural high schools. Outdated and "one size fits all" policies do not meet these needs. This "New Traditions" report gives governors a powerful new tool in developing appropriate options and policies that will help our small high schools and the rural communities they serve.

Bob Wise,
Governor of West Virginia.

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